

*Literature as Content vs Literature as Container:
The Case of Sherlock Holmes*

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Abstract

The presenter teaches literature in English in a city where English is not the first language. In the processes of course design, material search, assignment setting, assessment strategy and the actual classroom interaction with students, the presenter has been made aware of the constant decisions and adjustments necessary as students respond to the materials and activities. This presentation is some reflections about the choice of materials, teaching and learning activities used in the classroom, and how they work or fail to provide an interesting interdisciplinary learning experience for students whose first language is not English. This presentation aims to use the Sherlock Holmes stories as an example to demonstrate and explore how Literature from another culture can be taught in the university classroom in an engaging manner. The presentation reports how this set of materials has been used in the Humanities classroom in the teaching of literature, not only literature as the subject content, but also literature as a container of other skills most useful to university students, including critical thinking, creative communication, emotional literacy. The presentation is arguing that using literature as a container may rejuvenate literature to the contemporary university students, and make the teaching and learning experience a more dynamic and engaging one to both teachers and students.

Keywords: teaching Sherlock Holmes, Humanities in university, Emotional Literacy, Critical Thinking, Creative Communication

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Higher Education in Hong Kong

Hong Kong is an international city in many different ways, and the competitiveness of its universities, in terms of disciplines offered, human resources, research standards, hardware and software in infrastructure, student admission quality, etc. is well known. One of the strong features of local higher education is the adoption of English as the default language of instruction across different disciplines. In Hong Kong Baptist University, where I teach, the language policy is the same, English by default, although exemption from this policy can be granted if there are sound academic reasons. My home department is Humanities and Creative Writing, and we offer three different undergraduate programmes to students: Humanities, Creative and Professional Writing, and Liberal and Cultural Studies. In our programme course menus, there are some courses which deal specifically with aspects of local Hong Kong culture, such as Hong Kong Studies, or Popular Music and Society; and courses which discuss Chinese culture in the modern era, such as Modernity and China, which would make better academic sense if taught in the local language. Exemption can be granted in these cases if the department makes a strong case to justify.

While the academic content of courses certainly has a determining effect on deciding which language is the best for delivery, in the fields of Humanities, and Creative Writing, and Liberal and Cultural Studies, more than the academic content is at stake. Most of the courses within programmes of this nature are not dealing with factual information only, for the ultimate goal of learning is not the repetition of the facts, but the ability to employ certain skills in trying to understand different situations which might or might not have occurred historically. In other words, it is the abilities to apply one's critical thinking skills, creative communication skills, as well as acquiring and exercising emotional literacy (to start with) which are the ultimate goals of an academic training in the fields such as those covered by our department. It sounds really vague, and I am sure educators from all over the world have encountered the same questions from students and parents asking what is the practical, or utilitarian value of doing a degree in the Humanities, or the Arts. Partly as an attempt to address this seeming "vagueness" in the learning goals, various frameworks of measurements have been adopted by different educators to demonstrate the practicality of the field of Humanities.

Hong Kong Baptist University has chosen to adopt the Outcome-Based Teaching and Learning (OBTL) approach officially across all disciplines starting from AY 2012-2013. To facilitate this education approach, the course documents of all courses offered have to list clearly 3 to 5 course intended learning outcomes (CILOs), around which the teaching material, teaching activities, and assessment items will be designed. The focus of this approach is measurability. The CILOs stated for each course can be decided by the programme, but they have to be measurable through the suggested assessment items, be they in-class debate exercise, written term paper, or the written final examination. Against courses whose main academic content is literature (of a particular period, or genre), or creative writing, or film studies, I have used the CILOs to draw attention to the "practical" nature of this kind of training, by stating critical thinking, creative communication, and emotional literacy as the CILOs. In this paper, I am proposing that literature as container can be a useful approach to adopt in a city like Hong Kong, where the default language of higher education is English, but at the same time there is a strong tendency to view the

arts/humanities as less practical disciplines in terms of their value in our ultra-utilitarian society.

How does one demonstrate the desirability of teaching literature in English in a place such as Hong Kong?

I taught an elective course entitled “The Art of Creating Stories: Writing and Appreciation” in the previous semester in English to a class of 34 students. There were a few international exchange students (who did not understand Cantonese, Hong Kong’s main language of spoken communication) in that class which was composed of students from varied disciplines. Apart from two students from the English Department, the rest had no background in English literature, and most of the students were taking the course to learn about story-telling. English had to be the medium of instruction, as the content of the course was geared toward a western repertoire of written literature, as well as western films and art work. To make the learning experience a meaningful one for students from such varied background, I used the teaching and learning materials not only to demonstrate the various approaches of story-telling, but to make these issues relevant to the students’ own lives by designing the teaching and learning activities to achieve the CILOs stated above.

In the 13-week semester, a number of issues about story-telling were covered, and early on in the semester, an issue examined was the various reincarnations of some stories, how they change (or not change) in each reincarnation, and what these new versions convey to the readers/audience. Popular culture is full of rewritings/new versions of fairy tales and myths, telling us what has changed or not changed in the human world, expressed in different ways as the material conditions of our world change. I had chosen to use Arthur Conan Doyle’s iconic creation, Sherlock Holmes, the detective consultant, as the object of discussion, as there were quite a number of sharp and distinctive reworkings, which were very popular among the student body, despite the fact that the adventures of Sherlock Holmes started more than 100 years ago in Victorian Britain. I called the section “The birth of a legend – Sherlock”, and looked at “The Adventures of the Speckled Band” (1892), “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891), The Granada TV production of *The Adventures of the Speckled Band* (1984-85), The BBC production of *Sherlock*, season 2, episode 1, “A Scandal in Belgravia” (2011), and The CBS production of *Elementary*, season 1, episode 1, “Pilot” (2012).

The Many Lives of Sherlock Holmes

To many of the students in that class, Holmes and Watson were Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman, the two British actors playing Sherlock Holmes and John Watson in BBC’s production. I wanted to draw their attention back to the original detective and his side-kick as described in Conan Doyle’s words. So the first task I set for them was to ask them to write a description of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson based purely on the two samples of Doyle’s stories: “The Adventures of the Speckled Band” and “A Scandal in Bohemia”. I got some pretty interesting feedback from the students, as it was quite obvious that a lot of them were still describing Cumberbatch and Freeman’s personification of the pair rather than the partners in the written version. Some other students referred more closely to the written stories, and in the course of the interaction, a comparison between the 19th century and the 21st century partners emerged. Slowly, as students voiced their impressions of the

partners' age, their appearance, personalities as reflected in their behaviour and their language, as well as their world views, it was becoming apparent to all that there was a history of these two characters not only in the context of the crimes they encountered and solved, but also outside of the detective fiction genre, as Sherlock and Watson come with us to the 21st century.

This sense of a history of the texts and the characters, a development not only within the stories, but also external to the stories, in the real life (if I may), was something that I would like to highlight in class. As mentioned, lots of legends, myths and fairy tales had been revisited and rewritten over time. While these rewritten versions are interesting texts for comparison to know about human thoughts and feelings over different cultures and times, detective stories are uniquely interesting examples for discussion because of their close connection to the social and cultural settings from which they were born. On the one hand, it is true that as a literary genre, the detective fiction follows a more-or-less standard formula in its setting, characterization, plot development, and even closure. On the other hand, the main action of this genre is to trace the reasons and processes of human action which is very often the cause of the entire story, the detective fiction is potentially a site for revealing the human world's current values, way of thinking, life practices, and material conditions. Although very much aware that the detective story (in its written or TV form) is an artistic construction and not the reality, I still paired up examples of different Sherlock Holmes (and Watsons) and differently constructed Sherlock Holmes stories to encourage comparisons, hoping that the students would reflect on story-telling and our life through an examination of this foreign text and genre.

Critical Thinking 1

The first pair of examples for comparison was the 1892 short story "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" and the 1984 Granada TV production of that same story. Obviously it would be important for the students to go back to the original stories to see the birth of these two iconic characters before they could comment meaningfully on the later evolutions. Also the birth of detective fiction, at least the British tradition of the detective fiction, was closely tied to the Victorian era, in its reflection of the social and cultural conditions. So for students in our time, knowing Conan Doyle's written representation of that society, its practices and people's behavior is not for the purpose of being able to say how much we have advanced from that "primitive" age, it is actually to establish this natal link between the fiction and the society. After all, the Sherlock Holmes stories were published in the aftermath of the infamous Whitechapel Murders, when a serial killer who called himself "Jack the Ripper" committed numerous murders in the poor Whitechapel Area in East London.

The 1984 Granada TV production of "The Adventures of the Speckled Band" was a good text for discussion in relation to our focus because it was a visualization of the characters of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson, and the 41-episode series was considered a competent rendition of the adventures. Besides, Jeremy Brett was regarded by many as the best Sherlock Holmes of his generation – the hawk-liked features of his face, his build, and the way he personified the eccentric but efficient detective consultant were all considered faithful renditions of the written stories. Although David Burke's Watson was not as distinct and memorable, his rendition of the down-to-earth Watson worked quite well as a partner to the flamboyant Holmes.

Asking the students to comment on this 1984 TV visualization, I got very interesting feedback which revealed to me the gap between the production of this TV drama and the society we are living in now.

A lot of what they said related to the “feel” of the drama. Students all commented that it was not exciting enough. There was no misunderstanding about the plot designed by Dr. Roylott, the stepfather who killed off the about-to-marry stepdaughters in order to keep his share of the inheritance from his rich wife. Sherlock’s discussion of the various clues, and how they finally led to his conclusion about how the murder was committed were also understood clearly. However, it was not considered exciting enough by our young students, because of the setting/costume, the manners and behavior of the characters, and also the filming. While the students appreciated the carefully constructed Victorian atmosphere, such as the elegant domestic setting, the costumes, the gentle manner in which the characters spoke (except for Dr. Roylott and Holmes), they could not associate that to murderous excitement. It was to them costume drama, and bore nothing about the excitement of murder in their mind which was so used to fast-paced life.

To put their comments in perspective, I asked them to make a list of what could be done to “improve” the visual narrative to make it a more exciting detective drama for them. Suggestions covered several aspects: a) not surprisingly, the main cast – they would prefer younger Sherlock and John, because they associated youthfulness with knowledge, specifically knowledge in technology, and police work also meant agility and action, all much better performed by young bodies. b) the pace of the narrative – they found this TV drama too slow, too much was said. They would prefer action action, moreover, the editing of the film should enhance the quickness of action. c) ironically, what they called the Victorian mood – the seeming calmness of the setting, the subtlety of emotional and linguistic expression, and the overall repression which was manifested in the lack of blood, physical violence, and explicitly outrageous behavior. The students would rather have things visibly and directly presented, and characters not so polite.

These are very interesting revelations of what young people (19, 20 years old) considered exciting detective drama today. I considered this discussion comparing the Victorian short story the 1980s TV dramatization of “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” a useful one not only because I got to understand how some young people were trained by their experience (from popular culture today) to view this particular genre of fiction, but also to get them to think critically about popular cultural productions of different times. The genteel Granada TV episode of Sherlock Holmes maybe portraying one face of the Victorian culture, but even if they only conduct very brief research into the Whitechapel murders, they would come face to face with a very different picture of the same historical period. The victims of the murders belonged to the poorest classes who lived in London, and very often possessed nothing other than what they had on their body. The police force was not well equipped, and forensic science was very rudimentary (finger printing for investigation was set up at the beginning of the 20th century). This other side of the Victorian culture may not overthrow the generally genteel image normally associated to the Victorian culture, but it lends another dimension to the students’ understanding of the highly polite, even repressive Victorian genteelness.

Critical Thinking 2

From the portrait of repressed desires in the conventional Victorian era, we moved on to another comparison, between the 1891 short story “A Scandal in Bohemia” and the 2012 BBC production of “A Scandal in Belgravia”, which was based on the same story but had great extensions added to it. This was where Irene Adler, whom Sherlock Holmes called The Woman, out of respect and admiration, appeared. The 1891 story and the 2012 TV drama made a very interesting comparison because of the changes that had been made to the story to cater to the appetites of the 2012 audience. The 1891 story was pretty straight-forward, the King of Bohemia sought Sherlock’s help hoping to get back a compromising photo of him and Miss Adler, an opera singer, but also a great artist of disguise. Sherlock lost in this battle of wit with Irene Adler, as she escaped with the compromising photo, which she promised would not be used for blackmailing, just for protection. Finally Sherlock asked the King for a photo of Irene Adler for a souvenir, and even Watson was very surprised that Sherlock the “thinking machine” showed a more human side in wanting to keep a photo of the woman.

Students were all very excited about the BBC production of “A Scandal in Belgravia” because it had been transformed into a very sexy episode. There was Irene Adler, preferring to be called the dominatrix, whose “war dress” (to face Sherlock the great opponent) was her naked body, and the combination to unlock her safe was her body measurements, etc. The compromising photos (yes, no longer singular, but plural) featured her with a female member of the British royal family (thus suggesting a homoerotic relationship of some kind), and her battle with Sherlock was suggestive of a prolonged sexual play. Although Irene commented that “brain is the new sexy”, referring to Sherlock, who incidentally was nicknamed “the virgin”, sexuality was very visible in one way or the other in this supposed drama of detection, moreover detection by Sherlock Holmes the “thinking machine”. Thus students were very surprised to find that the inspiration for the BBC sexy episode came from the straight-forward and completely unsexy “A Scandal in Bohemia”.

A comparison between the two versions, represented in different media and created at different times, gave us something to think about concerning story-telling. The tolerance for explicit representation of sexuality had definitely increased (although BBC received 102 complaints within the first few days since its screening on 1 January 2012), but that did not necessarily mean that the overall attitude towards women and their role in our society had moved forward. (In fact, some feminists were not too happy about the 2012 Irene Adler.) A comparison between the 19th century detective story and a 21st reworking of that same story can be useful in showing not just how technological advancement has changed our understanding of what detection involves, the characteristics of people who engage in it, but also the values people embraced at the time. The detective story may follow an almost standard pattern, but what makes people kill, how they kill, how they avoid to be found out, etc. would make different stories at different periods.

Critical Thinking 3

In the comparison between the Victorian Sherlock and the 21st century Sherlock, a lot of students commented on the “advancement” in science and technology, and used

that as one of the reasons to give merit to the recent TV productions. While it was not particularly important that the students preferred the quick-paced TV drama produced recently, it was a good opportunity to get the students to learn more about the historical and cultural situations of the Victorian age, so that their explanations for supporting either version would be an informed one. It is true that in Conan Doyle's stories, there was no detailed description of any electronic gadgets employed by the police or even Sherlock Holmes for investigation, but the absence of these gadgets might not automatically mean "backward". What was policing like in Victorian England? Was there any training for policemen? How was Sherlock Holmes different from the official police body? How did the law look upon murders in those days? What was the East London demographic condition like? What other official bodies were involved when a murder happened? These questions could help students with a better understanding of the social situation then, and would give a better background to them for making any critical comments about comparing the policing situation now and then.

Creative Communication 1

In Conan Doyle's stories, the first person narrator was Dr. Watson, who was Sherlock Holmes' "partner" in solving the crimes, and also the unofficial chronicler of the adventures. Since most of the adventures they had together were documented (and commented) by Dr. Watson, his descriptions played an important role in how the adventures were perceived, and how the image of Sherlock Holmes was constructed. Very frequently, before Watson the narrator actually told the story of the adventure, he would "rate" the adventure personally, referring sometimes to how unexpected the outcome was, or how puzzling it was at the very beginning. Even before the readers know of the facts of the case, an impression was already formed by the way Watson introduced the story. Also, in the description of the adventure, besides the factual details, he would also give personal comments to how Sherlock Holmes reacted in the various unpredictable or dangerous situations. To a certain extent, readers' impression of the character Sherlock Holmes was not only formed by seeing his actions or manners, but also influenced by Watson's comments.

However, in the BBC production, because the adventures were unfolded visually in front of the audience, the "narration" was somehow more directly constructed by the characters' actions themselves. Depending on what an episode revealed to the audience, basically the characters "spoke" for themselves because the audience could witness their actions and language. Dr. Watson's role as the chronicler, and his influence over the description of the actions and the other characters had been reduced. This was very much felt by the students in the in-class discussion, when we started comparing the two different ways of story-telling. Almost as if to compensate for the loss in influence, and to update the 19th century narrative to match contemporary life, BBC had arranged John Watson to keep a blog, noting Sherlock's adventures and at the same time serving as a kind of publicity.

The interesting thing about Dr. John H. Watson's blog was that not only was it featured in the BBC TV drama, it was also a "real" existence in the world outside the TV drama, a part of the BBC publicity for this creation. This is an interesting example of how a comparison of the two renditions of the same Sherlock Holmes stories could result in observations and insights into not just the literary identity of the

text, but also how the literary text could also be used for demonstrating other useful skills and knowledge. In the BBC webpage publicizing Sherlock, John's blog contained responses from (fictional) readers and some were really trivial and completely out of the way. This is of course something not found in the original Conan Doyle stories, but the modernization of the stories by adding the blog, and the deliberate creation of these irrelevant responses changed the tone of the stories and even the image of the characters, thus creating a new identity which perhaps would be more welcome by the contemporary audience. Judging from the reception of the TV drama, this perhaps was one of the reasons for its popularity – audience identification. Discussion of such differences between the two versions of the stories had shown the students how creative communication, i.e. the different methods of “telling the story” actually changed the identity and the meaning of the stories.

Creative Communication 2

Another pair of examples discussed in class was that between the BBC production of Sherlock and the CBS production of Elementary, which featured a Sherlock Holmes who used to be a drug user and who went over to New York to engage in detective work as part of his rehabilitation. So there are a number of interesting “translations” – from the 19th century to the 21st century, from London to New York, from being private to working closely with the NYPD (although Sherlock had no official status). Sherlock Holmes still worked with extraordinary concentration and power of deduction, but his anti-social personality and his vulnerability (which caused him to use drugs in the first place) was enhanced, which changed somewhat his relationship with his working partner, Dr. Watson. And to make matters more complicated, Dr. Joan Watson was an ex-surgeon who wanted to bury a piece of her past and started a new career as a sober companion, hired by Sherlock's father to monitor his son's progress.

Although both TV dramas were set in the 21st century, these changes in the location, the personal qualities of the two main characters, and the gender of Dr. Watson, make Elementary a completely different story from the BBC Sherlock. I showed about 30 minutes of the first episode of Elementary “Pilot” to my class, and got some very interesting feedback. First of all, not as many students were aware of this TV series, and they were not as overwhelmingly attracted by the drama. I tried to get them to explain what they liked and didn't like about the two series, and it was interesting to see that although both were detective drama, the students' comments had nothing to do with the plot, the method of detection, the complexity of the crime, etc. They were all to do with the creation of the characters, the relationship between Holmes and Watson, and the way the visual narratives unfolded. To put it very simply, they had no comments about the methods by which these two Sherlock Holmes came to their conclusion, but they liked the BBC Sherlock and the way he worked with John Watson (taking advantage of John, and sometimes even making a fool of him) and then claimed that Sherlock in Cumberbatch's rendition was a cleverer detective. They also felt that the 90-minute episodes of BBC Sherlock much more intense and fast-paced than the 60-minute episodes of CBS Elementary. Mostly they liked the visual effects created by the very short and fragmented cuts in the BBC Sherlock. In other words, the creative communication method adopted by the BBC Sherlock had almost changed the identity of the story so much that the audience was no longer looking upon it as a detective drama.

Emotional Literacy

Emotional literacy is a relatively new term in the field of education. “To be emotionally literate is to be able to handle emotions in a way that improves your personal power and improves the quality of life around you. Emotional literacy improves relationships, creates loving possibilities between people, makes cooperative work possible, and facilitates the feeling of community” (Brian Matthews, 69). Although this is not a psychology class, to be emotionally literate is such an essential human ability that there is really no reason why it is exclusively taught in specific disciplinary courses. The humanities, with its historical background, and the nature of its content, is actually an ideal site to introduce emotional literacy into its participants. Even in the case of detective fiction such as the Sherlock Holmes stories, one can find ways of highlighting the different emotions, their causes, their visible manifestations, and how they influence our lives and our well-being.

Sherlock Holmes, in his many reincarnations, proved to be an ideal example for comparison and analysis in relation to discussing emotional literacy. In Conan Doyle’s story, Watson referred to Holmes as the “thinking machine” (that’s why he was so surprised by Holmes’ request to keep Irene Adler’s photo after being defeated by her), who was also a martial arts master, a violinist, a drug user, and someone prone to melancholy, among other things. This profile gave us a sense of the character, and allowed us to interpret and understand his responses to many of the situations in the adventures. On top of everything else, Sherlock Holmes was also an excellent character reader – his knowledge in human psychology helped him understand the motive, and the methods used by the criminals. So very often in reading the adventures, readers are not only “knowing” Sherlock through his actions and Watson’s personal comments about him. Readers are also taking a lesson on emotional literacy when Sherlock explained how he came to certain conclusions about the thoughts and feelings of the criminals.

BBC’s Sherlock had taken the basic character of Sherlock Holmes from Conan Doyle’s stories, but it had also selectively enhanced certain features to satisfy a more modern society and audience. Sherlock’s ability to use highly advanced technology was not only a feature of his talents, but also an indirectly enhancement of the “anti-social” aspect of this character, making him even more of a loner because he was surrounded by electronic gadgets. It was a useful and enlightening exercise to ask students to analyze Sherlock’s interpersonal relationships to reveal more the human inside. Of particular interest in this TV series was his relationship with John Watson, his own brother Mycroft (who featured much more than in the 19th century stories), the landlady Mrs. Hudson, Molly the coroner, Inspector Lestrade, and his arch-enemy Moriarty. Why did Sherlock maintain or fail to maintain a relationship with these characters? What were the feelings and thoughts behind his decisions about the way to interact with these characters? As Sherlock was visual drama, analysis of facial expressions, body language, and the verbal language could very easily be done.

When we came to review CBS’s Elementary, we saw some significant changes made to the basic setting and composition of the Holmes stories. Besides Sherlock being relocated to New York, there were changes in Sherlock’s most fundamental relationships. His partner was now a female doctor, an ex-surgeon who had a history of her own, and even his arch-enemy Moriarty was now a female character.

Sherlock's relationship with those who were closest to him thus acquired an additional dimension, that of ambiguity, because of the subtle manifestations of sexuality in all these encounters. The sexual intervention actually changed Sherlock's relationship with his own brother Mycroft in this CBS production. And his love and hate struggles with Moriarty made his involvement with this highly intelligent but ruthless criminal mastermind extremely complicated and tangled. Among all these complicated and intricate personal relationships, Sherlock Holmes the central character was previously a drug user, and was constantly reminded that the old habit could attack him when he was vulnerable. The creator of Sherlock Holmes might not like these changes to his genius, but in terms of character construction, this newly created vulnerable human being provides plenty of opportunities for us to illustrate different emotions and how they have play a part in our most basic daily encounters with others and with ourselves.

Conclusion

The literature classroom in Hong Kong can be very interactive and interesting even when the default language (medium of instruction) is not the students' mother tongue. One method to enhance learning is to carefully work on the choice of material and teaching and learning activities. This paper has suggested that an icon in popular culture can be creatively used in the literature classroom to teach not just the literature itself, but also be used to teach other essential and transferable skills to university students. I had used Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and several popular adaptations of the stories as raw materials for students to explore not only the content of the written story, but to use these stories as stepping stones to move into other area such as critical thinking, creative communication, and emotional literacy. Finally, let me conclude by saying that literature is not only just the content, but also the container, which carries interesting and rich possibilities for educators to enhance student learning in many different ways.

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